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THE FOURTH 'R': RISK



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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

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The "current issues" discussed in the essays following this introduction revolve around several "Rs" — Reagan and Reports and Reappraisal and, of course, Risk. However, it is not the nation but our schools and our children that are "at risk" according to our four authors, and the Reports and Reagan are greatly to blame. The "risk" they see and describe is very different from the "risk" of the reports. Maxine Greene speaks for each of them when she says, "One of my concerns has to do with a narrowing that might be a consequence of the recent reports, a channeling of human possibilities. If stress is placed on a prescribed range of literacies, if people are thought of primarily as resources to promote the national interest, opportunities for differential growth and development may be severely limited — especially for those whose capacities are not so prized today."

The four essays are arranged (1) to set the general political context through Gordon Cawelti's review of Reagan Administration policy; (2) to review and analyze several of the reports through Daniel Tanner's answer to his rhetorical question, "Who speaks for our schools?"; and (3) to provide cogent, fundamental criticisms of the current reforms in brief pieces by Maxine Greene and Mary Anne Raywid. As an inducement to your reading on, I have selected several short, but I hope intriguing, quotations which can be found in the pages which follow. I think you will find the arguments and analyses surrounding these quotations interesting and worthwhile.

Gordon Cawelti, Executive Director of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development — "It has always been my impression that the media can make presidential contenders out of extremely marginal candidates — as were Ronald Reagan in 1979 and George Wallace in 1971, and as Jesse Jackson was in the 1984 primaries. Such persons, despite their lack of experience are great communicators who are able to oversimplify and dramatize emotional but relatively meaningless issues that other candidates, in trying not to offend significant segments of the voting population, choose not to overemphasize."

Daniel Tanner, Rutgers University — "Early in this century, Dewey had warned of the dangers to democracy when a nation subordinates its schools in service to 'the superior interests of the state both in military defense and in struggles for international supremacy in commerce.' All three of these reports would have us subordinate our schools to such narrow nationalistic interests."

Maxine Greene, Teachers College, Columbia University — "How might we create the idea of excellence as a significant value? For me, it refers to a quality of mind; and, when I say 'mind,' I think as John Dewey did of something other than an immaterial substance or a computational device. Dewey thought of mind as a verb, not a noun, a verb denoting the ways in which 'we deal consciously and expressly with the situations in which we find ourselves.' Mind signifies attention, he said, and purpose. 'Mind is care in the sense of solicitude — as well as active looking after things that need to be tended ...'"

Mary Anne Raywid, Hofstra University — "I think the effects of state level curricula mandates are more likely to hinder than help educational improvement — and that this can be said even before looking at the substance of these curricular mandates. But the substance is such as to beget its own problems. I don't think coercion is the best strategy for improving education. As a matter of fact, if one's interest is really in eliciting a top level performance — an individual's very best efforts — coercion seems a poor strategy. Excellence is just not something you can force."

Acknowledgments

In addition to thanking the four authors for giving us their time, energy, and thinking, I am sure I speak for the membership of the Dewey Society in also offering written applause to A.S.C.D. for nearly twenty-five years of support as hosts of the John Dewey Memorial Lecture at their yearly meetings and in saying a special, "thank you," to Harold Turner for his role in making the memorial lecture a success. (The selections by Greene, Raywid, and Tanner were given at last Spring's A.S.C.D. meeting.) Also, of course, a word of appreciation for Glen Hass, Dewey Society President, who put together the Dewey Society program last year, which featured the address by A.S.C.D. Executive Director Gordon Cawelti reprinted here.

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